

The How: A Message for the UN High-Level Meeting on Non-Communicable Diseases

Friends of the UN HLM on NCDs

This September's UN General Assembly High-Level Meeting (HLM) on non-communicable diseases (NCDs) provides a strategic opportunity to propel the response – from 'where are do we want to be' to 'how do we get there.'

WHO's Independent High-Level Commission on NCDs¹ made a number of solid proposals to inform HLM negotiations. These include a call for governments to enhance regulatory frameworks to protect health, for example, through a code on the marketing of some health-harming products and a full-cost accounting of these products.

The draft of the HLM's Political Declaration prioritizes Universal Health Coverage, including affordable treatment, and promotion of mental health, but falls short on the primary prevention of NCDs and promoting healthy societies as per Agenda 2030.² The transition from health-harming to health-enhancing products and processes requires action across multiple sectors and strengthened public institutions. We propose an agenda for Member State HLM negotiators.

- 1) **Assign accountability at the highest political levels:** The WHO NCD Commission called on Heads of Government to lead the NCDs response, as was the case with effective AIDS responses. This will ultimately empower Ministers of Health ensuring all government departments are accountable to national leadership, and enabled to manage political opportunities, barriers and trade-offs for NCDs prevention. Rather than create new vertical structures, the NCD agenda should be integrated into national SDG plans. The Declaration must commit to distributed ownership, impact assessments, policy coherence and accountability across ministries.
- 2) **Prioritize improving fiscal policies:** Countries should implement a synergistic approach to taxing sugar (not just sugar-sweetened beverages, but also sugary snacks³), tobacco and alcohol, as well as unhealthy nutrients.⁴ The international community should provide technical advice on taxation and removing subsidies for processed foods, alcohol and fossil-fuels and divesting from tobacco and fossil-fuels; governments should also support healthy local food systems.⁵
- 3) **Mobilize additional financial resources:** The Declaration should call for dramatic financial increases for NCDs over the \$1 billion currently spent. Domestic resource mobilization, in line with the Addis Ababa Agenda Action, along with development assistance and catalytic external funding, are necessary to address issues of equity, provide public goods and ensure value-for-money through evidence-informed resource allocation.
- 4) **Regulate the commercial determinants:** Evidence suggests self-regulation cannot be relied on to deliver healthy outcomes. Building on experience from tobacco control, governments must regulate the alcohol, processed and ultra-processed foods industries.⁶ Effective regulation could drive improvements to production and formulation, restrict harmful marketing, mandate better labelling and set price incentives for healthier consumption. This requires building country capacity, creating strong health provisions in international trade agreements, as well as strengthening international institutions to counteract interference in establishing and implementing evidence-informed standards.
- 5) **Address the growing impact of pollution and urbanisation on NCDs, injuries and mental health:** The Declaration should call on governments and partners to (re)design and build

healthy communities that enable people to exercise freely and safely, access healthy foods easily, and reduce their exposure to household, traffic and industrial pollution.

- 6) **Support meaningful civil society engagement:** Agenda 2030 is premised on effective partnerships, including with civil society. The Declaration must ensure the meaningful engagement with and by affected communities, citizens and public interest groups, explicitly highlighting their role in national multi-sector planning and coordination platforms and independent accountability mechanisms. Countries should increase investment in the advocacy and service delivery functions of civil society and its networks.
- 7) **Uphold principles of equity, human rights and gender equality:** Recognizing the burden of NCDs and mental health is inequitably distributed across populations, responses must address differential circumstances (e.g. socio-economic position, gender, ethnicity, geography). Explicit commitment to a rights-based approach to prevention and treatment can help empower and protect populations living in vulnerable circumstances. As with previous UN General Assembly Political Declarations on AIDS⁷, this would entail: non-discrimination in access to information, services, affordable care, medicines and technology; meaningful participation of people affected by NCDs or mental health problems; and ensuring affected people know their rights (including to prevention) and have access to legal services to challenge violations.
- 8) **Foster independent accountability:** The Declaration should call for NCD Countdown 2030 which would encompass framing the response under existing human rights treaties, reliable reporting systems, independent monitoring, and review, and mechanisms to enhance and enforce compliance.⁸ Negotiators should embed NCDs accountability structures in existing sub-national, national and global SDG monitoring processes, ensuring the Declaration highlights principles of transparency, accessibility and inclusion.

The 2018 Declaration must focus on concrete measures which countries can adopt to implement, at a minimum, WHO 'Best Buys'⁹. Negotiators must make strong commitments to act on the above approaches to NCDs prevention. They should seize the opportunity to situate the NCD and mental health response within commitments to a more healthy and sustainable future, embracing food and transport systems, urban planning, conflict mitigation, pollution control, with the ultimate goal of achieving planetary health.

Note: The views expressed in this correspondence are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the institutions to which they are affiliated.

¹ WHO (2018). Time to Deliver. Report of the WHO Independent High-Level Commission on Non Communicable Diseases. Accessed at <https://bit.ly/2J4wsRa> on 20/06/2018

² UNGA HLM3 NCDs: Zero draft outcome document. Essential elements. Dated June 6th 2018. Accessed at <https://www.un.org/pga/72/wp-content/uploads/sites/51/2018/06/NCD-8-June.pdf> on 20/06/2018

³ Smith RD, Cornelsen L, Quirmbach D, Jebb S, Marteau T. Reducing sugar consumption: are sweet snacks more sensitive to price increases than sugar-sweetened beverages? *BMJ Open* 2018;8:e019788. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2017-019788.

⁴ Sugar, Tobacco and Alcohol Taxes (STAX) Group. Sugar, tobacco and alcohol taxes to achieve the SDGs. *The Lancet* 2018;391:2400-2401

⁵ Monteiro C, Cannon G. The impact of transnational “Big Food” companies on the South: A view from Brazil. *PLoS Med* 2012; 9(7): e1001252.
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001252>

⁶ Moodie R, Stuckler D, Monteiro C, Sheron N, Neal B, Thamarangsi T, et al. Profits and pandemics: prevention of harmful effects of tobacco, alcohol, and ultra-processed food and drink industries. *The Lancet*. 2013.381(9867): 670-79.

⁷ United Nations General Assembly. Political Declaration on HIV and AIDS: On the fast track to accelerating the fight against HIV and to ending the AIDS Epidemic by 2030. United Nations, A/RES/70/266 Accessible at:
<http://www.unaids.org/en/resources/documents/2016/2016-political-declaration-HIV-AIDS>
Accessed 20/06/18

⁸ Hunt P. SDGs and the importance of formal independent review: an opportunity for health to lead the way. *Health and Human Rights Journal*. September 2, 2015. Accessed at
<https://bit.ly/2s7ospK> on 20/06/2018

⁹ WHO. ‘Best buys’ and other recommended interventions for the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases: Tackling NCDs. WHO (Geneva) 2017. Accessed at:
<http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/259232/WHO-NMH-NVI-17.9-eng.pdf?sequence=1> on 20/06/18